

I Come With Joy

In Oakland, California, a Roman Catholic church has been remodelled. The altar on the far wall has become an altar-table on a low circular marble rise in the middle of the church, around which the congregation sits in circles. People are thus brought closer together, so that they can see each other, as a community gathered round Christ's table.

"I come with joy" puts this theology into words. It begins with the individual ("I come"), recognizing both modern individualism and the earlier piety in which people would speak of "making my communion" with God.

As the hymn progresses, the "I" gradually becomes "we." The second stanza links us with other Christians—not only those immediately present but the global community in Christ. By the end of the hymn we have both met together and

been bound together (st. 5), not by force or manipulation but by the gracious, freeing love of God in Christ. Though both versions of the hymn express this, the 1995 revision is perhaps simpler and stronger, as "I come" becomes "we'll go" and joyfully "give the world the love that makes us one."

As the "I" becomes "we," the community knows Christ's "real presence." Though God in Christ is always present within and among us, "closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet" (as my evangelical friends used to say), communion is given so that the presence "ever/always" near may be "better known" not in the bread and wine by themselves, nor in the community by itself, nor in whatever we think of as the right words said by the right people—but in the totality of the experience, real yet impossible to capture in words.

In 1969, when I first wrote this text, most communion hymns focused on solemn remembrance of Jesus's suffering and death (notable exceptions being Isaac Watts's "Jesus invites his saints" and Catherine Winkworth's translation of Johann Franck's "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness").

To counterbalance such one-sidedness, the hymn begins, emphatically, "I come with joy." The emphasis comes from placement rather than typography: the first line of a hymn, its *de facto* title, gives it emphasis (and hopefully direction). Though Jesus indeed suffered and died for us, communion is not a memorial service to a long-defunct leader, but an encounter with the living Christ, whose

1983

I come with joy to meet my Lord,
forgiven, loved and free,
in awe and wonder to recall
his life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near
to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love
in Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share
each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one,
and strangers now are friends.

And thus with joy we meet our Lord:
his Spirit, always near,
is in such friendship better known;
we see and praise him here.

Together met, together bound,
we'll go our different ways,
and as his people in the world
we'll live and speak his praise.

1995

I come with joy, a child of God,
forgiven, loved and free,
the life of Jesus to recall,
in love laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near
to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love
in Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread, and bids us share,
each proud division ends.
The love that made us makes us one,
and strangers now are friends.

The Spirit of the risen Christ,
unseen, but ever near,
is in such friendship better known,
alive among us here.

Together met, together bound
by all that God has done,
we'll go with joy to give the world
the love that makes us one.

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complete work (life, suffering, death, resurrection) saves, rebirths, and sustains us. Though the 1995 revision loses "in awe and wonder," it gains in completeness, as we meet to recall all the life of Jesus, laid down for us in love.

The two versions printed here are those most commonly used. Because the text is in common meter (86 86), many tunes go well with it. I wrote it with STRACATHRO in mind. LAND OF REST, DOVE OF PEACE (North American hymnals) and WINCHCOMBE OR ST. BOTOLPH (United Kingdom) sound equally well.

In his book, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not For Clergy Only*, Lawrence Hoffman suggests that in our time and culture, God's presence is most fully known in community, and asks us to recognize the "voice of gentle stillness" (1 Kings 19:12) in those moments during worship when a story is heard, a prayer uttered, bread and wine are shared, and we know that something important has happened.

May it be so! ■

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